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Radioactivating

COMMUNITY RADIO CONFERENCE

Nicaragua

by Dot Tuer

I Want to Explain a Few Things . . .

To my children and all the children still with us,
I want to explain a few things
Just to tell you, for example,
that fires, grenades, machine guns
are necessary, real, needed,
because how can we win this battle
relying upon geraniums and roses?
Of what use is song that remains but song?
Of what use unless it bursts forth in rifles,
blossoms into plows, then books?
That is why, children, I want to explain a few things,
lest you fear the final bullet

Alenka Bermudez Mallol¹

Prologue

It is the morning after the federal election. I am awake (barely), and I am trying, (without much energy) to finish an article on an international community radio conference I attended this summer in Nicaragua Libre. I feel as if I awoke this morning with a bad hangover that is going to last four years. I feel as if the dream-drenched humidity and the idealism of international solidarity experienced in Managua are a million miles away. I imagine, as part of a Canadian arts community, a sense of disenfranchisement and pre-eminent gloom. The Free Trade deal is here to stay. The red carpet is unrolled and Mulroney, all smiles, is waiting at the front door.

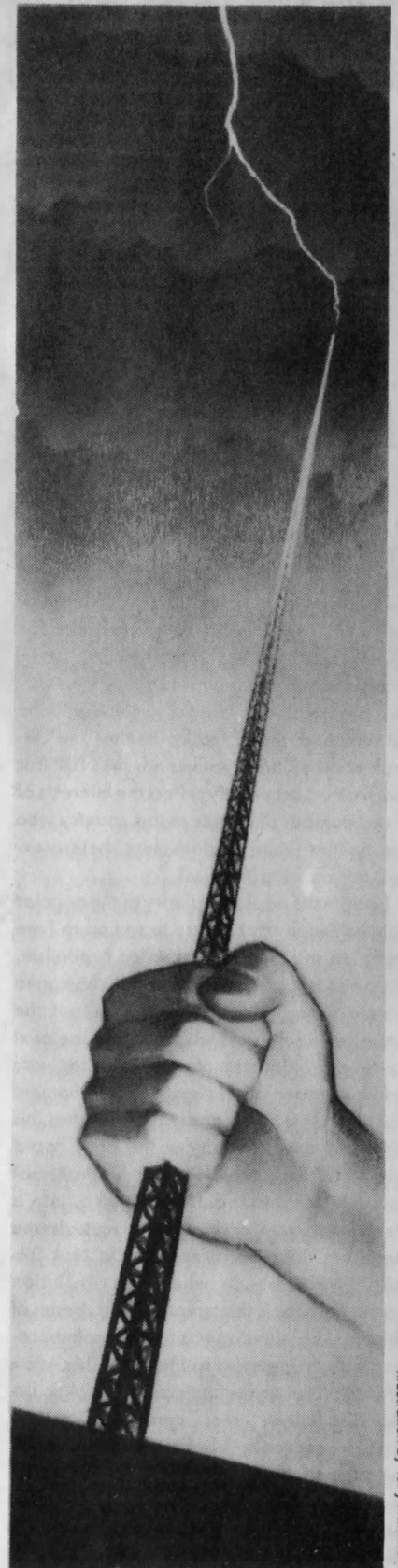


Illustration by Tony Hamilton.

Artists, on the other hand, are probably going to be shown the back door, quietly and effectively silenced through a strangulation of funding, an onslaught of American entertainment, and their own inability to identify the enemy and shed the conditioning of a liberal individualism for a necessary collectivization of resources.

But was there ever any doubt about the outcome of this dogfight? Could artists and writers and marginalized groups who have never been given an active voice in this country expect to be visible in a turn around of public opinion when big business showed an unprecedented interest in an election result? When the forces to be, the forces who boast Power and Money and an unequivocal Desire to put profits before people pour millions of dollars into mass media advertising? When intervention from our "friendly" neighbour to the South is not simply about a Reagan endorsement but about a stock market fluctuation and a tumbling dollar the day that the polls show a lead for Liberal John Turner? And when, finally, neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives nor the NDP (for that matter) accurately reflect the interests of a vast number of people in this country who are neither white, middle-class, heterosexual, nor aspiring Yuppies?

Despite the odds, a majority of the popular vote rallied in this country to say no to Free Trade, to say no to an unbridled capitalism, no to a massive privatization, no to having to watch a man with lockjaw talk about the American dream on television for the next four years. Unfortunately, a popular vote and a representational system of parliament did not quite jibe, and Mulroney has his historic second majority in the bag. Faced with this chilling prospect, there is the temptation to fall into a defensive slump, into a deep sleep with a sign posted outside the bedroom door which reads "Do Not Disturb. Wake me up when the revolution comes." There is the temptation to dream of the good old days or of a fantasy collaboration with the new era as the inevitable wave of the future; to romanticize a nostalgic fiction of a Queen Street "community" where there was only ever a bohemia or to rationalize alienation as the adaptation of Canadians to a postmodernist condition in which history has ended and politics have disappeared.

Dionne Brand, in her new book, *Sans Souci*, dedicates her short stories to Faith with the line "to be awake is more lovely

than dreams."² She reminds us in her dedication and in her stories, as did many of the radio broadcasters gathered in Nicaragua for the AMARC III (Association Mondiale des Radio de Type Communautaire) conference, of a world where people do not sleep, but struggle in their daily lives and in their art to change "the inevitable wave of the future." As we rub our eyes in disbelief in the wake of the federal election, wondering whether to go to sleep or wake up, to dream of resistance or to actively resist, the examples of popular struggle and the commitment of the community broadcasters at the AMARC III conference become all the more important. The women radio workers of Central America expressed the importance of learning from the international women's movement. At this historical moment, however, I would argue that we have much to learn from them, and much to learn from all cultural activists, including Canadians, who woke up long before the Free Trade Deal became a reality.

The Conference

On August 22, 1988, I arrived at the airport in Managua, Nicaragua Libre, drove in a taxi past the National Palace and the ruins of the Cathedral, past corrugated iron huts and stretches of jungle undergrowth, through the centre of a city which has no centre on my way to attend AMARC III, an international conference on community radio. In the next few days, participants from all over the world would meet to discuss and exchange the ideas and ideals of community radio. Unlike many conferences, in which location becomes a backdrop to the debates which emerge among delegates, Nicaragua offered a context in which the passion of politics and the articulation of ideology were integral to the proceedings. From Tomas Borge's opening speech to Daniel Ortega's guest appearance to the day trips planned to radio stations throughout the countryside, the government was on board and on side, a partisan rather than indifferent host. And the strategic geography of Nicaragua meant that for the first time in AMARC's short history (the first two conferences were held

in Canada) participants from the "Third World," in particular from Latin America, outnumbered European and North American delegates.

Nicaragua is a small and extremely poor country, bankrupted and destabilized by the United States' dirty war, economic blockade, and the continuing internal interference of the CIA. Firsthand evidence of the hardships the Nicaraguan people must endure, however was not experienced by the majority of the participants. Delegates were lodged in Samozza's old mansions and at an expensive hotel on the outskirts of Managua; transported around the city by a fleet of buses despite the chronic shortage of public transportation and gas rationing in Managua; and wine and dined while the plunging value of the Cordoba meant most Nicaraguans could no longer afford even the basic food items. The lavish hospitality notwithstanding, delegates did confront an on-going dialogue in which materialism was framed by the dreams of literacy and food and basic housing rather than the desires of yuppie generations for coffee table books on architecture and the new sushi bar and a renovated semi-detached in Cabbagetown; where the propaganda of culture was not veiled as entertainment but articulated as revolutionary struggle; and where art was about participation rather than acquisition.

Towards the end of the conference, a woman delegate from Canada was talking to me, and exasperatedly confided that she was sick to death of hearing about the revolutionary process. This comment completely took me aback, both in her imagined sympathy for such a statement, and for its lack of sensitivity to the political situation of the country in which she found herself. Her statement, however, did point to the context which framed the week of dialogue and workshops and caucuses. For Nicaragua provided both the setting and the platform in which community radio was no longer conceived as an outlet of marginal culture, at best tolerated by the state in North America, but was privileged as the medium of popular resistance and participatory democracy. What this definition of popular resistance was, and how it could be acted upon, however, was shaped by the conditions and restrictions facing community radios in different countries and political regimes.

In the crudest sense, the participants divided themselves between those who believed music could change the world (à la Amnesty International) and those who were fighting for social change and the right to a people's expression on political and military



Illustration by Tony Hamilton.

as well as cultural fronts. From Radio Freedom of the ANC to Radio Farabundo Martí and Radio Veceremos of the FLMN; from the indigenous programmes produced by Ecuadorians and Bolivians to the voice of the Dene Nation in the Yukon; common goals of community radio were articulated as:

1. Break with vertical integration and bring to the community issues and information that are important to daily life.

2. Give all peoples and marginalized groups a medium in which they can actively self-determine an expression of their culture.

3. Agitate for social and political change.

Within the larger framework of the conference, these goals were not always respected. Both the Third World and Women's caucuses experienced institutional obstruction, highlighted in the heavy-handed politics of the North Americans who fought for administrative control during the formation of the NGO (non-governmental organization). AMARC applied to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) for B status as an NGO. This will make AMARC eligible for U.N. funding and provide access to U.N. information. The final outcome of the conference, however, in which the constituency of the NGO steering committee elected at the plenary reflected a majority of voices from the Third Worlds,

reinforced the goal of community radio as a political and cultural tool of self-determination.

The clarity of purpose and vision which frames radio broadcasting by peoples in struggles of revolution and autonomy became even more evident in an afternoon meeting of women radio broadcasters and producers. A decision was taken at this meeting to divide into two groups; women working in radio in the First World and women working in radio in the Third World. It was agreed we would talk among ourselves and present group positions to be discussed as a whole. In the group of First World women, many diverse issues were raised. The difficulty of working with men, encountering sexist attitudes, a "boy's school" mentality, the lack of technical training and access, the often failed efforts to include the participation of racial minorities, and volunteer burn-out were some of the problems articulated. Feminism was most often cited as the political force behind participation and struggle was framed as a need for more women's programming and equal air time.

When we returned to the round table, the Third World women's group presented their discussions first, giving an historical overview of women's roles in society, in wars of liberation, and in radio. Although women

from a variety of countries attended, this group primarily represented Central American perspectives, with two women from Nicaragua and a representative of Radio Farabundo Martí (from El Salvador) speaking. Mariana Blanco, who produces the first "feminist" programme in Nicaragua at Radio Insurrección in Matagalpa, provided a general overview of radio in Nicaragua, emphasizing its importance to a country with poor road systems and isolated collectives, and its accessibility to a people's culture which has a highly developed oral tradition. In the war of liberation, radio functioned as a medium for agitation and information. After the liberation, radio became an essential component in giving voice to different sectors of Nicaraguan society from campesinos to industrial workers. From Mariana's perspective, the women's movement in Nicaragua is still young, and with the mobilization for the war against the United States, it is difficult to obtain priority for women's programming. She felt that women in Nicaragua were still fighting for better access and for equal participation from all sectors of society. In this context she added that women must also find time to fight for the survival of their families, and simultaneously maintain a job, political responsibilities, and contributions to the war effort as well as find



Photo by Michael Dyer

Musicians from El Chile outside a regional radio station set up by Radio Insurreccion.



Photo by Michael Dyer

Radio Insurreccion, Matagalpa, Nicaragua.

the time to volunteer for community radio programming.

Luy Gonzales, who is the director of Radio Pancasan in Jinotega, a war zone near the Honduran border, spoke to the contradictions which Mariana had articulated in a more personal testimony. She described her work in radio as double-edged: to break the terror of women's silence and to break the terror of the war which has engulfed her region. As a sole support mother with five children, and as a woman in a position of power, she had to find the strength to work a twenty-four-hour day. As the director of a radio station in a war zone, she had to provide examples of leadership, be prepared to hitchhike to the front to report on a contra atrocity and to encourage women in the region to speak of their feelings and their fears. She explained that she saw women's issues in terms of helping the campesino women in her region; discussing problems of health, isolation, and the difficulties of working in the home and in the fields while the men were participating in self-defence patrols.

Yolanda, who spoke on behalf of the women at Radio Farabundo Marti, was very young and extremely articulate. In the eight years of struggle by the FLMN, Yolanda said that it was now possible to talk of a women's movement in the FLMN. The breakthroughs, however, were not easy, and they had to constantly struggle to ensure the incorporation of women in all aspects of the FLMN's revolutionary process. She pointed to the efforts of women in the FLMN to learn from and absorb the experiences of the Nicaraguan and Cuban women, to break with all traditional roles, and to frame the struggle for women's participation in the new society within the context of national liberation. In radio, she described the efforts of a collective, now with an equal number of women and men, to transmit three or four hours of programming a day. Their work is dangerous and exhausting, requiring the crossing of enemy lines to obtain information, and constant movement around the country to elude military pursuit. The radio, in terms of its focus, is an important source of agitation but is also essential as a social and cultural tool, broadcasting programmes directed towards women in marginalized barrios, including discussions of health care and women's issues.

The testimonies heard that afternoon, far from leaving most of the "First World" group sick to death of hearing about the revolutionary process, gave most women who attended the meeting their first encounter with the dedication, commitment and

courage with which women in Central America are fighting for a women's movement within the larger context of national liberation. The unity and determination which shapes their struggle on many simultaneous fronts is formed by very different conditions than those which frame the strategies of community action and popular expression which exist for women working in the North American and European sister stations of the FLMN and FSLN. That does not mean, however, that we as First World activists can afford to either lionize their struggle as extraordinary or to imagine that our "democracies" will always provide the alternative space for the ideas and visions that Central American women had to achieve through military means.

In Britain, for example, the institutionalization of racism and classism supported by the Thatcher government's policies has created a situation in which community radio is banned and all popular radio broadcasting by groups fighting the status-quo is de facto illegal and subversive. There is no unified voice of the people, but underground stations, organized and listened to by different communities face confiscation, fines and jail sentences for their efforts to confront the white, state supported blackout of their voices. Working class, Asian, and black communities use portable antennae and rely on constant movement within the cities in order to elude police. Their programming, which is a source of agitation and information, is also a medium in which minority cultures can frame their music and literature in a context where art is the art of resistance; made by and heard by the people who are fighting the right-wing policies of the Thatcher regime.

Lest we in Canada, where community radio is both legal and flourishing, become complacent and smug in the belief that the Mulroney government is any more benevolent than Thatcher's, a few recent political developments should be seen as advance warning signals. In Vancouver, Co-op Radio, an established and left-leaning radio station, is facing the very serious threat of a shut down. At the CRTC hearings in 1988 several interventions by independent lobby groups were brought against Co-op Radio for broadcasting a programme called *The Voice of Palestine*. Under CRTC guidelines, any licensed radio is required to create balanced news reporting of issues which are of public concern. Co-op Radio presented a defence of their programming which stated that they were following the regulations of the CRTC by offering the public information not available through the mass-media. The CRTC did

not agree. Instead, the CRTC sent a memo of guidelines to all community radio stations that defines balanced news as presenting all sides of a political issue which is of public interest within a reasonable space of air time (reasonable to be defined by them). The final irony of this directive is not only the concept "balanced" coverage by the mass media, but the control given to the mass media to define what is an issue of public concern. For it is only when the mass media goes hot on an issue that the imperative for balanced reporting goes into effect. Thus federal prison reform, native rights or AIDS medical care can be discussed at will until the mass media decides that they are issues. *Central American News* (produced by CKLN) can present the ANN broadcasts from Nicaragua without air time for the contra's position only until the mass media declares it a prime time story.

Stripping away the bureaucratic double-speak and liberal evocations of balance and fairness, community radio is in effect being told to watch its step. Too much left-wing propaganda without enough air time for the right-wing to rant away, and there goes your license. Out of step with the mass media who now has a direct lever of control over the relationship of reporting to politics at a community level, and there goes your license. Co-op Radio is not off the air, yet. They were given a three year provisional renewal of their license on the condition that they submit monthly reports to the CRTC proving they are following the regulations on properly balanced news. CKLN is now being monitored by two right-wing factions, factions waiting for an obvious slip in "objectivity," for evidence of a left-wing bias or inflammatory comments like "fuck Free Trade" in order to pressure the CRTC to revoke CKLN's license. In 1990, almost every campus community radio station is up for license renewal before the CRTC. The commissioner of the CRTC called it a "happy coincidence."

In the era of Free Trade, "happy coincidences" begin to have ominous overtones. The battle over Free Trade split the country into class, ideological, and regional divisions which were always present, but rarely acknowledged. I doubt the benefits of Free Trade which gives Canadians the right to buy cheaper VCR's, cheaper stereos, and cheaper fashion clothes can heal these divisions overnight. Rather, political positions are no longer going to be tolerated as dissent in a country which politely agrees to disagree. Under Free Trade, I suspect governments will attempt to silence difference, if not by outright banning, then through the

great Canadian tradition of underfunding which guarantees failure and an increasing bureaucratic demand for paperwork and reports that discourage and burnout already overworked volunteers and underpaid staff.

The testimonies and idealisms of the AMARC III conference may seem a million



Illustration by Tony Hamilton.

miles away, but the analysis of government repression and goals of self-determination have an immediate resonance for Canadians struggling to fight not only against Free Trade, but against a political system where the potential for co-optation and factionalization with its divide and conquer mentality seriously affect our efforts to create an alternative culture. This is clearly not the historical moment to go to sleep, nor even doze off for a second. As cultural activists in an hostile political climate, we must draw our strength from the examples of unity and clarity presented by so many of the delegates at AMARC III, declare our soli-

arity and our allegiance to popular struggles throughout the globe, fight like hell, and as we would say in a capitalist country, give the Conservative government a run for their money.

Postscript

It is my last day in Nicaragua. The conference ended a week ago. The passions and discussions and frenetic activities of the conference melt into the rhythms of Managua's daily struggle against a war of aggression. The streets are full of people waiting, waiting for the war to end, waiting for the economy to collapse, waiting for the rains to come. The contradictions between development and underdevelopment, between dreams and reality, amplify in the steamy torrents of a tropical storm and in the deafening chatter of the birds at dusk who hawk like vendors from the trees. I walk through deserted stretches of jungle overgrowth, walk past a children's park where a diesel engine from the 1940's is propelling the horses of a merry-go-round. I reach the cathedral destroyed by the 1972 earthquake I passed in a taxi my first day in Nicaragua. I have the impression, walking through its ruined facade, that I am playing a cat and mouse game with the ghosts of Samozá, the ghosts of the revolution, in this place empty of people, of martyrs, of gods. Opposite the cathedral is a small park, where children are gathered to watch the slow movements of an ancient turtle trapped in a dirty pond. This turtle, enclosed, depressed, poor, and declawed, is still able to bite. In Managua, I never heard a plane. I never saw a helicopter. I only heard the silence war creates, and saw a people, surrounded and besieged, continue to fight, like the ancient turtle, for a dream of freedom. ■

Footnotes

1. *You Can't Drown The Fire: Latin American Women Writing in Exile*, edited by Alicia Partnoy. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1988; page 225. (*I Want To Explain a Few Things* was written by Alenka Bermudez Mallol who was born in Santiago, Chile. She became a citizen of Guatemala and one of her children was killed in combat in Guatemala. She now lives in exile in Nicaragua where she represents the Alaiide Foppa Guatemalan Cultural Workers Association).
2. *Sans Souci and other stories*; by Dionne Brand; Stratford, Canada: Williams-Wallace Publishers Inc., 1988.

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